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#BBCTrending: The man serving life for marijuana

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**By BBC Trending**

What's popular and why

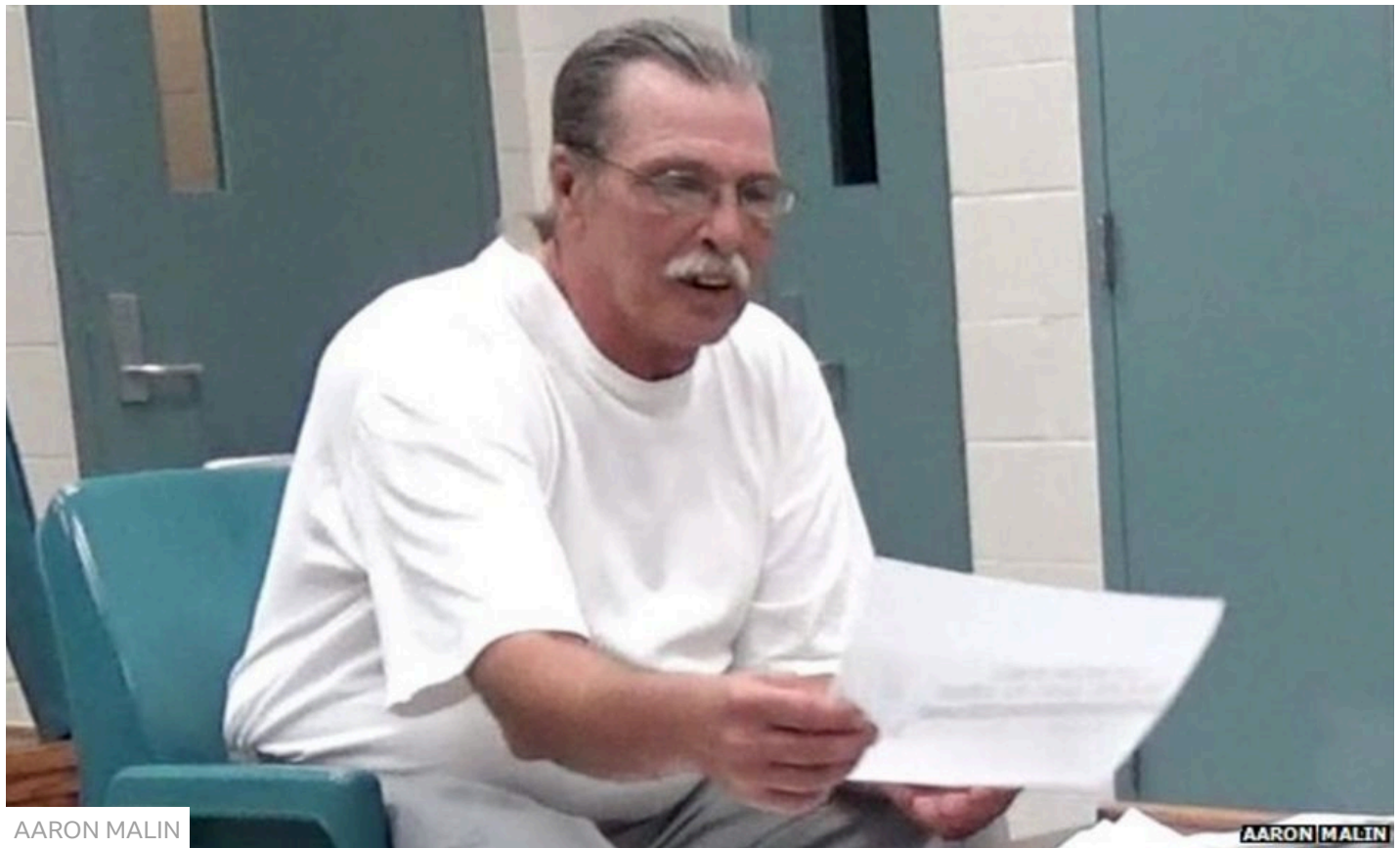
Campaigners in the US are calling for the release of a man in Missouri serving a life sentence without parole for a marijuana offence. They are crowdfunding and using the hashtag #FreeJeff.

Jeff Mizanskey has been in prison for almost 21 years. For 20 of those years, no-one outside his friends and family had heard of his case. But in the past months, and weeks in particular, that has started to change.

More than 370,000 people have signed an **online petition** for his release. And now campaigners are **crowdfunding** to try to raise \$21,000 (£12,000) for him - a symbolic \$1,000 for each year he's been inside. They plan to spend the money raised on billboards, and a media campaign to raise awareness of his case.

In 1994 Mizanskey was found guilty of "**possession and intent to distribute**" cannabis. It was his third offence, and under Missouri's "prior and persistent drug offender" law, he was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

"He's been in prison since right after I was born," says Aaron Malin who's organising the **#FreeJeff** fundraising, and is director of research at Show-Me Cannabis, which aims to get marijuana legalised in Missouri. "He's never used the internet, or even held a cellphone... He's not familiar with the concept of Twitter - much less a hashtag," he adds.



Over the past few years, the laws on marijuana have been relaxed in many parts of the US. It's been decriminalised for medical use in a number of states, and for recreational use in Colorado and the state of Washington. Set against this context, it's a "disturbing irony", says Malin that - barring clemency from the governor of Missouri - Mizanskey will spend the rest of his life in prison.

"It really resonated with people," says Ray Downs, staff reporter with the Riverfront Times, who was the **first to write** about Jeff Mizanskey's story. "It kind of blew a lot of people's minds... here in Missouri you'd be hard pressed to find people who say 'This guy should be in prison until he dies,'" he says.

Indeed most of those commenting on the story online are supportive of the campaign for Jeff Mizanskey to be released. "This man should NOT be behind bars. He has more than served the time befitting his crime," **wrote one woman** who donated to the fundraiser. But not everyone agrees. "A drug dealer is a drug dealer no matter the drug. He's right where he belongs," wrote another woman.

The office of the governor of Missouri told BBC Trending they're currently "reviewing the merits of a petition for clemency submitted by Mr Mizanskey". Across the US, there are **a number of people** serving life sentences for cannabis-related convictions.

Reporting by **Cordelia Hebblethwaite**

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